

**U.S. Embassy Muscat**  
**Webchat on Human Rights, December 12, 2012**

**CO.NX Moderator (Sarah):** Welcome to U.S. Embassy Muscat's virtual space. Please join us for a webchat on December 12 at 3:00pm.

In honor of International Human Rights Day, which falls on December 10, Political Officer Christine Harper will be leading a discussion on human rights. Our discussion will include the history of International Human Rights Day, as well as what role Oman and the U.S. play in the international human rights community.

Christine will be online live December 12, typing answers to your questions. If you would like to submit an advance question, you may do so by typing in the space below.

**Erin from Public Affairs:** Welcome to everyone just joining us. Christine Harper is getting logged in and looking forward to answering your questions. Feel free to type your questions about Human Rights Day by typing in the space below.

\* Erin from Public Affairs:

**Christine Harper:** Welcome to U.S. Embassy Muscat's first-ever live web chat. Today's topic of conversation is International Human Rights Day, which is celebrated every year on December 10 to commemorate the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations.

I look forward to spending the next hour with you. You can start asking questions whenever you are ready.

**TLS:** Hi Christine! This discussion was described as "an opportunity to discuss the roles of Oman and the US in international human rights"...I guess you prefer a Q&A format...fine. So here's an obvious question: is the purpose of this exercise to get anecdotal evidence for your 2011 human rights report on Oman?

**Christine Harper:** Hi, TLS! The answer to your question is a resounding NO! While I do rely on government and non-governmental contacts to help me in drafting the Human Rights Report (HRR), this webchat is really just a chance to engage with people in Oman about human rights in general.

**TLS:** OK, fair enough. To be honest, I think people in general (especially Omani nationals) are always suspicious of being asked questions by a foreign diplomat. I have a feeling there are others wondering, so just thought I'd ask. Given the billing of this event on Sabla, perhaps I could put the question to you: what do YOU think the role of Oman is in the field of international human rights?

**Christine Harper:** For those of you who don't know what TLS is referring to, as Human Rights Reporting Officer at the Embassy, I'm responsible for drafting several reports every year on different human rights issues; the one you are likely most

familiar with is the Human Rights Report. A version in both English and Arabic of the 2010 report on Oman is available on the Embassy's website (link below). The Department of State also issues a report on International Religious Freedom and on Trafficking in Persons. I meet with a wide range of individuals to gather information on these topics, and I am an avid reader of Omani newspapers and blogs as well.

Well, very broadly speaking, Oman, like every other member of the international community, strengthens human rights when they uphold them at home. More specifically, I see Oman as a leader in the region on some of the trickier issues such as human trafficking and religious freedom.

**Hanan Bait Obaidoon:** Hi Christine. Thank you for the clarification. The way I look at it is that there is no full granted human right country in the entire world, Oman included. And I know that the Omani government take your report seriously based on what we have seen.. And I'm thankful for that.

**Christine Harper:** Thanks for your comment, Hanan. I absolutely agree that every country in the world has certain human rights issues that they should address.

**Hanan Bait Obaidoon:** One of the issues that I feel Oman needs to take more action is the marriage of Omani women to foreigners. They make it so complicated and the children resulted from this marriage don't get the Omani passport and the expat husband doesn't get the permit to stay in Oman! Therefore, most of these couples live abroad even when the marriage is already approved by the government.

**Christine Harper:** The Embassy is very concerned about this particular clause in Omani nationality law, and we are raising these issues with high-level Omani officials.

**TLS:** That sounds like a very constructive outlook. Human trafficking and forced labour are obviously big issues in the GCC, and in June this year all GCC countries signed up to the ILO's [International Labor Organization's] additional agreement to extend workers' rights to domestic workers. Of course implementation, even for other workers, is still the big issue, but may I ask whether this is something that US officials and high level visitors raise with Oman and other host governments as a matter of course?

**Christine Harper:** Believe it or not, this is the part of my job I spend the most time on. We are constantly engaging with Omani officials across all government ministries on trafficking issues. In fact, just last month, Ambassador-at-Large on Combating Trafficking, Luis CdeBaca, visited Muscat. We met with Omanis in the ROP, the Public Prosecution, Ministry of Manpower, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

**Hanan Bait Obaidoon:** related to workers, I think all people (doesn't matter where they come from) should have the same salary and benefits at the same salary group. An Indian with the same level of education and expertise as an Omani should get the same salary.

**TLS:** I agree, Hanan, for economic and cultural as well as human rights reasons! The existing practice doesn't just exploit migrant workers; it makes a disincentive to employ Omanis, anyway, sorry for the digression!

**Christine Harper:** I agree that while Oman has accomplished a lot in recent years to combat trafficking, more needs to be done. The issue of passport retention is one we would like to see a bit more action on. While the practice is illegal in Oman, there is no penalty. A small fine would likely go a long way to cut down on the practice. On this topic, I was happy to see the discussion taking place in the "Muscat Daily" a few months ago, in which readers offered up their opinions.

**Hanan Bait Obaidoon:** I think unions are there in some companies but not functional

**Christine Harper:** They are still in their very early stages, but they are growing at a fast pace, especially after the events earlier this year. I understand that there are about 150 company unions in Oman, some of which are very active, some not so much.

**Hanan Bait Obaidoon:** that's very good to hear Christine, about the unions. Thank you for sharing.

**Hanan Bait Obaidoon:** what are the other issues that you are dealing with in Oman, Christine? Issues that you might [need] an insight from insiders like us?

**Christine Harper:** Non-trafficking labor issues, such as unions. Religious freedom (Oman gets a gold star on this one!). Freedom of expression/association.

**Mona the Shy Rebel:** Hello. Since I'm more interested in women's rights I would like to ask about what have been done for Omani women's rights. For example you know that FGM [Female Genital Mutilation] is a big problem and many women had it done to them in some parts of Oman, any efforts exerted to put an end to it??

**Christine Harper:** We actually talked about this quite a bit yesterday at a student meeting at MCBS yesterday. We've flagged this issue in the HRR [Human Rights Report] for the past several years, and I am in contact with local representatives of international NGOs in Oman to come up with some ideas. We found it encouraging that the government has published information on this topic in newspapers; it shows that they're concerned about this issue as well and want people to start talking about it.

**Hanan Bait Obaidoon:** sorry. What is FGM?

**Mona the Shy Rebel:** female genital mutilation

**TLS:** "female genital mutilation", also known (inaccurately, which is part of the problem) as "female circumcision"

**Hanan Bait Obaidoon:** oh OK. Coming from Salalah, this happens a lot. It's very sad

**TLS:** That's reassuring to hear. Are such issues raised specifically at the most senior level as well as between officials?

**Christine Harper:** Absolutely. This is a topic that is discussed at all levels, both here and in other countries.

**Hanan Bait Obaidoon:** I think the best way to deal with FGM is education, educating the parents on the consequences.

**Christine Harper:** Absolutely. Sadly, all of the literature suggests that this is a practice carried out by women on their daughters and granddaughters. They are simply carrying on a tradition passed down across generations. Men, including fathers, often have no idea it is going on. Talking about the issue is the first step towards ending it.

**Mona the Shy Rebel:** Educating people about FGM is not really a difficult task to do, or at least asking them to rethink about it. I really hope someone do[es] something about it. I'm 22 and I know a few girls who are younger than me but still believe that every woman should have FGM done to her. That is really unfair!!!

**Hanan Bait Obaidoon:** Mona, I think peer education is very important in the FGM issue. Peers influence each other greatly

**Christine Harper:** And I'm glad to see a lot of Omani bloggers (some here today??) talking about this subject.

**TLS:** On the subject of FGM, I noticed the reference in last year's State Dept human rights report on Oman to the Ministry prohibiting the practice by doctors in hospitals. This seems a little ingenuous or inaccurate, as the doctors allow non-doctors to carry out the practice in the hospital instead! This practice, normally type 2, or complete excision of the clitoris and labia minora, is carried out on approximately 20% of all Omani women. It's not a small issue. That means approximately 100,000 baby girls have had their clitoris cut off by an old woman with a razor, in the last ten to fifteen years.

**Christine Harper:** I don't have the numbers you are citing. My understanding of the law is that no one can perform FGM in government hospitals or clinics.

**Hanan Bait Obaidoon:** TLS is right, it is performed in hospitals and clinics.

**TLS:** You might be aware of a columnist and blogger called Susan al Shahri; she wrote an eye-opening article on this earlier this year. It should still be on her blog. As Hanan and Mona have pointed out, the practice is almost universal in the Dhofar region, or about 15 per cent of women, but also widespread among certain northern tribes (including branches of the ruling family), and among some families with East African connections

Christine Harper: Thanks, TLS. It was read widely at the Embassy:

<http://susanalshahri.blogspot.com/2011/06/woman-with-frankincense-burner.html>

**Hanan Bait Obaidoon:** I think making legislation about FGM may not solve the problem as parents will still do it at home and cause a bigger health risk to the baby girl.

**Christine Harper:** But it's a first step. Or, rather, we should press for more education as you've all discussed here today, AND encourage legislation prohibiting the practice.

**Hanan Bait Obaidoon:** people need to hear it from a reputable religious leader to state that FGM shouldn't be performed; people then will listen

**TLS:** I agree with Hanan on that point. One of the problems is that there is no prominent case being made against it from a religious standpoint. (Sorry, there are plenty of religious cases made, but not by Omani religious leaders)

**Hanan Bait Obaidoon:** exactly

**Christine Harper:** Other than what we've discussed here today, what do you guys think are some important human rights issues here in Oman?

**Hanan Bait Obaidoon:** As per religious freedom, I think people here from all walks of religions co-exist in a very civil manner

**Christine Harper:** I agree. Both in the region, and in the world at large, Oman is a leader on this issue.

**TLS:** I would say there are some general weaknesses in recourse to the law for ordinary people, but as a matter of bureaucratic weakness and structure rather than policy.

**Hanan Bait Obaidoon:** u mean cases stay in the court unresolved for so long.. is that what u meant TLS?

**TLS:** Hanan: no, I mean corruption and dealing with "influential" people, or even being able to take the Government to court if they have done you wrong

**Mona the Shy Rebel:** And I would say we need REAL education! I got a text message from someone saying that America has published a corrupted copy of the Quran and now is selling it in Kuwait. You will find so many people who believe that is true!!! People here tend to believe everything.....

**Christine Harper:** Believe it or not, people in the U.S. are just as likely to believe incredible stories. But I agree that education is the key to fighting disinformation campaigns.

**TLS:** Mona: I think that's a variation on the (true) story of someone being arrested in Kuwait for distributing a Christian Arabic book called "Al Furqan". But it probably gets worse every time the story is told. Everyone here loves a conspiracy!

**Mona the Shy Rebel:** No TLS, I wasn't talking about AlFurqan!!

**TLS:** I would just like to make a comment, as time is running out, on the format: I can see why comments are vetted before being seen - nobody wants an argument or anything unpleasant. But I am wondering why do this conversation in English? Sure, the average Omani has years of English tuition at school, but to have a serious discussion about such issues requires a high level of confidence and proficiency. Having this discussion in English makes an artificial restriction to the economic elite of the country, so there's a risk of a rose-tinted view, or missing serious issues among the poor and poorly educated majority

**Christine Harper:** Hi TLS, this is a great point. This platform requires the "host" to make public everything that is submitted, but, as you can see, we are publishing all your questions and comments. As this was our first ever webchat, we decided to host it in English, but we will definitely look to doing future programs in Arabic.

**TLS:** I don't mean to be overly critical - I do genuinely recognize the sincerity of interest in human rights issues. But I fear you're serving your own ends badly, by advertising in Arabic, and then adding an elitist exclusion through language.

**Christine Harper:** OK, thanks everyone. I've really enjoyed our discussion today.

**Mona the Shy Rebel:** Thank you Christine.

**Hanan Bait Obaidoon:** Thank you all, it was a very interesting discussion.

**TLS:** Thank you Christine, best of luck in Haiti by the way!

**Walaa AlSalmi (IRC Director):** Thank you everyone for participating on our first webchat. Please check our Facebook page or Twitter account for future events.

**Erin from Public Affairs:** Thanks everyone! And please let us know via Facebook or email if you have suggested topics, themes, or times, we'd love to have more folks participate! You can email hartem@state.gov (Erin Hart, Public Affairs) or Walaa AlSalmi (AlSalmiW@state.gov), our IRC director. bye!